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Doodle Bug

Lydia Webb

THIRD PLACE: SHORT STORY

DOODLE BUG

by Lydia Webb

Mother said that Uncle Jack tried to kill himself once. One night after supper, about dusk, Jack said, "Hey, Paw, I'm gonna go out and feed the hogs. They ain't had nuthin' all day long. They's hungree." So Jack shut the screen door with a bang and took off down the back steps. Everybody in the family assumed he was headed for the barn to get a bucketful of corn to pour into the pig pen. But Jack had spied Joseph MacDonald Moore's (Paw's) shotgun leaning up against the back porch. Nobody knows what was going through Jack's head at the time, but he picked up the shotgun and carried it with him to the barn.

After thirty minutes had passed, and Jack still hadn't come back to the house, Paw began to wonder. He pulled his chair out from the table, stretched his long arms, yawned, and said, "Well, ya'll, I'm going out 'n see what that Jack's up to." Paw found Jack all sprawled out next to the barn, his face halfway buried in the white, sandy soil. Paw's shotgun was lying next to Jack, and at first, Paw figured that Jack was just playing with the gun. The safety was still on. As Paw was feeling and looking around for wounds, Jack slowly raised his head. Paw said, "Hey, boy, what's the matter with you? You been playing with this thang? Don't you know guns are dangerous?" Uncle Jack slowly rose to his feet and said, "Paw, I fainted. The gun didn't go off. Damn it, the gun didn't go off!"

Uncle Jack was 25 years old at the time he tried to commit suicide. The family had him sent to the state mental hospital following the incident. Everybody knew he was really trying to kill himself. Mother told me Uncle Jack "wasn't right," that he could never learn like the other children did in school. There were eleven children in the Moore family-- eight girls and three boys. And when one of the boys "acts strange" in such a large family with so many girls, it is very noticeable.

Uncle Jack's suicide attempt happened before I was born. He stayed in the mental hospital for a few years, then came back to live at home in Elba, Alabama. Before Grandmother and Granddaddy Moore died, our family went to see them and our other relatives in Elba, usually once a year. It was a long trip from North to South Alabama. Our home is fifty miles north of Birmingham, and Elba is about 100 miles south of Montgomery. It was a hard, tiring trip before the interstates were completed. But, for me, as a child, it was never boring. The trip to South Alabama was like seeing a "different world"; there is so much difference between the two sections of the state. The land in South Alabama is flat; the earth is red clay or white, sandy soil; cotton, corn, and peanuts are grown there; kudzu runs wild everywhere. Grandmother's house (where my mother grew up) was out in the country, where the air was so still and hot in the summertime, it was stifling. Sometimes the only sounds to be heard there were helicoptors flying overhead from nearby Fort Rucker. On the trips down to Elba, I remember seeing Negroes sitting out on porches in front of dilapidated shacks; huge cattle ranches near Montgomery; and "WALLACE FOR GOVERNOR" billboards along the highway.

On most of the trips, we pulled into Grandmother's yard after the sun had gone down. Sometimes it was as late as 9:00 or 10:00 at night when we reached Elba. The house was dark; Grandmother, Granddaddy, and Uncle Jack were asleep. But they woke up when Mother knocked on the side door and called out, "Momma! It's Gladys!" If the door was unlocked, we (all seven of us) walked on into the house. We went into Grandmother and Granddaddy's room; they turned on the light over their bed, hugged us, etc. Then, my brother, sisters, and I would go say hello to Uncle Jack. He'd sit up on the side of the bed, turn on the overhead light (the kind with a chain) in his bedroom. Uncle Jack didn't normally kiss us in greeting, but he always smiled sweetly, despite the fact that his teeth were rotten. Uncle Jack would say to us, "Howdee!" Then, he'd stop and look at each one of us individually. He'd smile again, with a friendly look on his face, and a faint twinkle in his eyes. He said, "Ya'll chilluns lookin' good, lookin' good!" Then he would turn to me and ask, "Now, which one' you--Sharon or Carol?" Stifling a giggle, I'd answer, "No, I'm Lydia!" Uncle Jack always got his nieces, nephews, and other relatives mixed up. He remembered names, but got the faces confused. My father's name is Dwight, but Uncle Jack usually called him Richard or Bill, other brothers-in-law. Whenever Daddy came into the room, Jack would say, "Well, hello, Richard! Did ya'll have a good trip?" Then, Uncle Jack always asked my father: "You ever see Big Jim Folsom up there in Cullman? He's a fine guvnah, a fine guvnah!" ("Big Jim" Folsom is originally from Elba, was elected governor of Alabama twice, and now lives in Cullman.) Daddy said that Uncle Jack wasn't too bright, otherwise, but he knew the number of every major and minor highway in the South, all the truck stops along the way, and the names of every crosstown junction in Alabama. But Uncle Jack still thought the "guvnah" was "Big Jim" Folsom.

Uncle Jack's room was drab and bare. The only thing interesting about it was the light bulb hanging down from the ceiling, with mosquitoes and moths flying around it at night. There was a bed with an iron headboard, a small window, a small closet, and a few clothes hanging on wall hooks. Uncle Jack wore rather drab clothes: either khaki pants with a khaki shirt, or grey pants and grey shirt. He was partially bald, with greying hair. He had a long nose, long face, and grey eyes. He was of medium build and height. At Grandmother's house, he just ate and slept. Since he had some type of stomach trouble, just about all he could eat were bananas, milk, and oatmeal. In the kitchen, he'd sit on a stool at the table with a bowl of oatmeal, slapping it up to his mouth with a spoon. At mealtime, he rarely said anything; just an occasional grunt to indicate he was content.

We children knew something was wrong with Uncle Jack. We knew he "wasn't right," as Mother said. He wasn't like the other adults we'd been around. In fact, we could identify Jack as "one of us," as one of the children, rather than a grown-up or an uncle. I just thought of Uncle Jack as Mother's brother; a man who'd never married; a stranger in an old house, having grown up in poverty as Mother had. Jack was a man who seemed not to be aware of the world around him. It was this unawareness, this naivete, a dullness that separated him from

other adults. He was like an innocent child in some ways. He'd chase us sometimes with a fly swatter, playfully spanking us if he caught up. Playing peek-a-boo with his baby nieces and nephews, he seemed to enjoy the "surprise" of peeking as much as the baby would--he'd have such a grin on his face. One day, one of my sisters and I were playing dolls out in the barn. Uncle Jack strolled out there, said, "Howdee! Let me shows you somethin'." Then he crouched on the ground beside us, picked up a straw stick, and poked it into a small, sunken place in the dirt. He turned the stick around and around, while saying: "Doodle bug, doodle bug, you go so slow. Doodle bug, doodle bug, come out of ye hole!" Then out would come crawling a little bug from the sand. Ever since Jack taught us that little game, we'd play it every summer at Grandmother's house. We'd find little "doodle bug holes" around the barn and drive them out of their sandy homes with a stick. The "winner of the day" was the one who found the most "doodle bug holes."

Uncle Jack was not completely an "unproductive member of society." He more or less supported himself financially, buying his own clothes (which he wore year after year), his own food (milk, oatmeal, and bananas), etc. For several years, Uncle Jack worked at Sessions peanut butter factory in Enterprise, Alabama, where a monument has been erected to the bollweevil pest. Uncle Jack also drove a diesel truck for a company out of Dothan. Some of my cousins claimed he had saved up $6,000 from his job, and had the money stashed away somewhere. (We all figured he stuck it under his mattress.) One afternoon, Daddy discovered four brand new truck tires out in the barn. Uncle Jack would not comment on them, but Daddy guessed that Uncle Jack dreamed of owning his own diesel someday, and putting the new tires on it, whenever he bought the truck. However, Uncle Jack had an accident one day on the job, which "set him back" both physically and mentally. He was loading a bale of cotton onto a company truck one morning, and the bale fell on top of him, breaking his hip. He had to be hospitalized for a few months, to treat the damaged hip. Then, Uncle Jack was returned once again to the state mental hospital, when he started thinking that the FBI was "after him" and that they were taking pictures of him with a camera inside his electric shaver. Jack remained there up until a few years ago.

When Grandmother Moore died, the old house was vacated. Her children, following the funeral, got together to decide what to do about the house and property. The house was large, but old and in bad condition. The land surrounding it has been worn out by too much cotton and too little rain. However, the house was sold to a family, and the place was more or less forgotten about.

Uncle Jack did not seem happy at the state hospital, so the children (his brothers and sisters) decided that they would take turns keeping him in their homes until a permanent, satisfactory place for him could be found. Uncle Jack stayed at our house for three weeks one summer. He lay in the "easy chair" all day long, listening to country music on the radio, and talking to himself. Mother finally had to remind him, after a week, that he needed a bath. Once every day, he'd walk away from the house with his slow, leisurely stroll, and a toothless grin on his face, like a child going after ice cream. After three weeks of visiting with us, Uncle Jack went to stay with his sister's family in Birmingham. Aunt Jean and Uncle Richard came to pick him up one Saturday afternoon. Mother gathered up his few possessions, and put them in a small suitcase. Then we wished him farewell, and he walked out the door with Mother, who walked him to the car. As Uncle Jack laboriously got himself into their Volkswagen, I watched him from the kitchen window. Suddenly, feelings of pity and compassion filled my heart as I watched the poor man, a person nobody really wanted. Tears came into my eyes; I felt such sorrow for Uncle Jack and his empty life and his mental illness. He was not only a person stricken with a mental illness, but also the product of a poor and deprived background.

As I stood there at the window that day, I thought to myself that Uncle Jack was like the doodle bug, deep in a sandy and lifeless soil, a creature poked out, only to return again. I'll never forget Uncle Jack and the doodle bug for as long as I live.